

## The Buddhist Criteria of Ethics (Part2)

### The criteria of the Noble Eightfold Path

(Transcribed from Prof. Oliver's Lecture)

All forms of morality in Buddhism are either demanding or directly connected from and to the noble eightfold path. The eight paths is the repository of the Buddhist ethics, that is, the Buddhist ethics remains in the noble eightfold path. That is because the path is recommended to perfect morality through which one can understand the four noble truths.

The eightfold path is the path **to be practiced by both the laity and the clergy**. It does not mean that the lay person can go through the beginning to the end of the path. It is not so. But only a certain extension the lay can go along the path. At the same time, it is the path to be followed by the monks. There is no other path for the monks as far as the perfection of the morality is considered. In the discourses the Buddha says that the eightfold path is the right path for both, lay and clergy, to follow; there is no other path.

I will elaborate this. **The lay person** who begins to follow the path should change his civil status in the middle of the path. In other words, it is very difficult, almost impossible, for the lay to become arahant even though there were some cases at the time of the Buddha. Those cases do not say that the lay people can be arahant easily. It was very rare cases. The reason why I say this is that the path indicates three levels of spirituality. In many discourses the Buddha says that as long as the lay people realize to follow the path, they should come to the conclusion that they **should renounce the household life**.

In many discourses **the factors of the path are defined**. In the *Saccavibhanga Sutta* (MN), which is the discourse of the analysis of the truth, the Buddha says the path factors one by one and defines them, not explains them. When we examine his definition is that the person who enters the path changes his position in the middle of the path and of the end. This is one aspect.

The other aspect is that the eight factors of the path can be divided into **three categories**, taking into the consideration of the operation of morality. The first two factors (*Sammā diṭṭhi* and *Sammā saṅkappa*) form one category; the second three factors (*Sammā vāca*, *Sammā kammanta*, and *Sammā ājīva*) form another category; and the last three factors (*Sammā vāyāma*, *Sammā sati*, and *Sammā samādhi*) form the other category.

We usually understand this is the division of the eightfold path into the **threefold training**, but it is not so. **It is something else**. In this regard, **the path begins with *Sammā diṭṭhi* and *Sammā-saṅkappa*, the order never changes at all**. In the hundreds of discourses the Buddha gives the path in this order. The first, if we are going to divide the eight factors into three-fold training, the *Sammā-diṭṭhi* and

*Sammā-saṅkappa* should go down to the last part of it; but it never happens. The second, the path has only eight factors. There are no more factors. The path is not complete even if a single factor added or recommended into the eightfold; it should be taken out.

*Sammā diṭṭhi*

Now, what is the *Sammā diṭṭhi* and *Sammā saṅkappa*? The *Sammā diṭṭhi* is a new outlook. The person develops the world view for his own sake. That is the function of *sammā-diṭṭhi*. Regarding the world view, you cannot go further because it is the very basic principle and foundation at this level. The person has got a new perspective, **a new vision** which was never known to him before. Thus *Sammā diṭṭhi* covers **basic ethical environment** in his ethical behavior.

*Sammā saṅkappa*

Now, according to the *Mahācattārisaka Sutta* (MN), what happens at the second part of the path is that the **conceptual change** on the basis of the vision in which the person has kept changed. That is called *Sammā-saṅkappa*. A new vision and conceptual change are necessary for any one to proceed the path. These two things are the foundation which is provided by the person. Taking the second one (*Sammā saṅkappa*), **conceptually** he becomes **morally good**: he does not want to hate others; he does not want to engage in any sexual indulgence, so on. Now the foundation is very well established by these two factors which are the first part of the eightfold path.

The second part has three factors which indicate the basic good to be practiced and how the person to be simply good. These three factors are very important because if you can at least live with this level, you can be good. Those three factors are thus:

*Sammā-vācā*: speak good words and avoid four kinds of bad words, that is, abstention from telling lies, harsh words, backbiting gossips, and meaningless talks.

*Sammā-kammanta*: it is abstention from killing, stealing, sexual misconduct.

*Sammā-ājīva*: live righteously.

These are the fundamentals to be developed if you go further along the path. In other words, man should be **physically and verbally moral to the minimum level**, not at the maximum level. These are the simple things to be done at least.

The last three factors form another category, till then what happened was that we selected the new vision, we changed our mentality towards others, and we developed deeper moral principles. All these are connected to our **physical and verbal environment**, then another aspect to be developed, that is mind. The last three are the **development of mind at the minimum level**. It is interesting to note that even though it is given at the end of the eightfold path, the *Sammā samādhi* is not the end of the path. The path has to be followed from *Sammā-vāyāma*, to *Sammā-sati*, and to *Sammā-samādhi*. But you should make yourself ready to go further on the path after *Sammā samādhi*.

The *Sammā samādhi* is one of the **four trances or jhānas** (absorption). It is still not the end of the path. Even after develop *jhānas*, you don't understand the four noble truths comprehensively. But so

far up to *Sammā samādhi*, the person is taken to a certain level so that now he can enter, without doubt, the correct path which leads to realize the four noble truths. This indicates that **the eightfold path is based on the various levels of morality; without morality there is no understanding of the truth.** The truth can be understood on the basis of morality. There is no divine intervention. Man has to do it by himself so that he can be **morally perfect**. The perfection is taken into consideration in the noble eightfold path.

Now the person who has followed the path, has realized the four noble truths and has experienced nibbāna called **Arahant**. He has his qualities which are **not confined within the noble eightfold path** which ends just with *Sammā-samādhi*.<sup>1</sup>

I would like to mention two points about the noble eightfold path.

## 1. The Common Misinterpretation of *Sammā-āṇava*

The noble eightfold path is the result of avoiding two extremes (self-indulgence and self-mortification) by the *pabbajita*, those who renounced the world. But interesting thing is the Buddha says that the noble eightfold path is not only for the *pabbajita*; it is open to all.

In the path, three individuals are taken into consideration. **The first four path factors** are defined in the discourses without employing any personal language. For example, the fourth path, *Sammā-kammanta*, is defined as *pāṇātipātā veramaṇī*, *adinnādānā veramaṇī*, and *kāmesu micchācārā veramaṇī*. In this definition a person is not taken in. Thus all the first four path factors **are defined in** this way of using **impersonal language**. It means that the first four path factors (*Sammā-diṭṭhi*, *Sammā-saṅkappa*, *Sammā-vāca*, and *Sammā-kammanta*) are **common to all**. They can be practiced by anyone; men and women, monks and householders.

When the fifth one (*Sammā-āṇava*) is defined a person is taken into consideration. That person is called *Ariya-sāvaka* (noble disciple). So it is not for all; one should become an *ariya-sāvaka* to practice *Sammā-āṇava*. Then the last three (*Sammā-vāyāma*, *Sammā-sati*, and *Sammā-samādhi*) are defined with application of the individual called '**bhikkhu**.' One must become a bhikkhu to practice the right effort, right mindfulness, and right concentration. They are not for ordinary people. If they are for ordinary people, the Buddha would define these factors without taking person into consideration. If the fifth one is for all, the Buddha would not take *ariya-sāvaka* into consideration. Therefore, the fifth path factor is very important in the path.

---

<sup>1</sup> There are some canonical texts in which we can find the further path after *Sammā-samādhi*: *Sāmaññaphala Sutta* (DN), *Ariyapariyesanā Sutta* (MN), and *Aṭṭhakanāgara Sutta* (MN). According to them, the person can choose one of two ways after *Sammā samādhi*: one is the **extra sensory perception** and the other is the **formless attainment**. By the way the person chose, he can eventually eradicate all defiling impulses and attain the Arahantship. According to the *Aṭṭhakanāgara Sutta*, there are **11 more paths after *Sammā-samādhi***.

It is up to the fourth path (*sammā-kammanta*) that any one can go along the path. But to step into the fifth (*sammā-ājīva*) one should become an *ariya-sāvaka*; the ordinary person cannot go into the step of *sammā-ājīva*. This is the **critical juncture** of the noble eightfold path.

In the tree well known books about Buddhism published both in English and Sinhalese, this *sammā-ājīva* is closely **misrepresented**. One is Ven. Walpola Rahula, *What The Buddha Taught*, chapter V; the second is Ven. Bhikkhu Bodhi, *The Noble Eightfold Path*; the third one is Ven. Piyadassi Thera, *The Buddha's Ancient Path*. In these three books *Sammā-ājīva* is understood as five forms of trade which are banned by the Buddha: (1) trade of human being (*satta vaṇijja*); (2) trade of weapons (*sattha vaṇijja*); (3) trade of meat (*maṃsa vaṇijja*); (4) trade of poison (*visa vaṇijja*); (5) trade of intoxicating drinks (*majja vaṇijja*).

In the *Pañcaka Nipāta Sutta* of the *Aṅguttara Nikāya*, the Buddha says that the *upāsaka* should not do these five forms of trade. However, in this particular Sutta, the Buddha makes no mention of *sammā-ājīva*; he does not say that this is what *sammā-ājīva* is. Therefore, the five banned forms of trade cannot be taken as the meaning of *sammā-ājīva*. Furthermore, these are the forms of trade which should not be performed by *upāsaka*. The *sammā-ājīva* should be practiced by the *ariya-sāvaka*, not by the *upāsaka*. The *upāsaka* is the person who has gone into the refuge of the tree gems. The *upāsaka* is at the initial stage of practicing Buddhism. But the person who is about to practice *sammā-ājīva* has gone into the half way of the path. He is not at the initial stage.

It is said in the Buddhist discourses that **to become an *ariya-sāvaka*** one should **at least** become **the *sotāpanna***. The *ariya-sāvaka* is not an ordinary person. Spiritually speaking, there are two individuals in Buddhism: one is *puthujjana*, the ordinary individual, who has not heard of the Dhamma or even heard but does not practice the Dhamma. He is not a disciplined person. He does not know who the nobles are; the other is *ariya-sāvaka*, the noble person, who has realized one of the eight stages of spiritual attainment. One should cross over the stage of ordinary person (*puthujjana-bhūmi*) and go to the stage of noble person (*sāvaka-bhūmi*) to practice *sammā-ājīva*. If we take *sammā-ājīva* as the five forms of ban trade, it is mainly for the business people. But they cannot practice *sammā-ājīva*, it can be practiced only by the *ariya-sāvaka*.<sup>2</sup>

The meaning of the term *sammā-ājīva* can be better understood when we read the *Mahācattārisaka Sutta* (MN). This sutta gives us the methodology to understand the proper meaning of each of the path factors. Accordingly we should pay our attention to the opposite words of each of the path factors. To understand what *sammā-ājīva* is, we must know what *micchā-ājīva* is. The Buddha defines the *micchā-ājīva*; refraining from it is *sammā-ājīva*. In that definition, the ban forms of trade are

---

<sup>2</sup> There is **no difference** between *sāvaka* and *ariya-sāvaka*. The person became *sāvaka* is always noble (*ariya*). When we worship the Saṅgha, we worship only the *Sāvaka Saṅgha* of the Buddha; it is quite different from the Bhikkhu Saṅgha. The bhikkhu should become an *ariya-sāvaka*; but there can be lots of ordinary (*puthujjana*) bhikkhus. Interestingly, it is said in the discourse that there are lay people who become *sāvaka*. Therefore when we worship the *Sāvaka Saṅgha*, we also **worship the lay *sāvaka***. The *Sāvaka Saṅgha* is the **Saṅgha of the eight individuals** which can be categorized as four: from *sotāpanna* to *arahant*.

not mentioned. No where in Pāli Tripiṭaka the ban forms of trade are mentioned in relation to *sammā-ājīva*.

There are **five terms** of the *micchā-ājīva* given in that Sutta, in explaining *sammā-ājīva*: (1) *kuhanā* (scheming); (2) *lapanā* (talking, prattling); (3) *nemittikatā* (hinting); (4) *nippesikatā* (belittling); (5) *nijiginsanata* (pursuing profit); refrain from this *micchā-ājīva* is *sammā-ājīva*. It has nothing to do with any form of trade.

(1) In the sutta, there are various of ways of scheming are counted. (2) There are various ways of talking to deceive others. (3) To praise of things which other person has, in expecting that he will give it. (4) There are also various ways of looking down others. (5) We all want to get profit over profit.

This is greediness for gain upon gain. There are ten pages of description about these five terms in the first chapter of the *Visuddhimagga*, the chapter called '*sīla niddesa*' (description of virtue). It has nothing to do with any form of trade. These are **how to people behave** in the society. There are three terms indicating for what purpose people do such behaviors: **in order to get** profit (*lābha*), benefit (*sakkāra*), and reputation (*siloka*). This is the nature of human being. This is the measure of the ordinary individual which should be discarded completely to practice *sammā-ājīva*.

That is why I say that **the *sammā-ājīva* marks a special juncture of the path**. When the person come to the path factor of *sammā-ājīva*, his position should be completely changed; he should be an *ariya-sāvaka*. The last three path factors are for bhikkhus. So, **three individuals** are taken into consideration in the path: the ordinary person, the noble disciple (*ariya-sāvaka*), and the bhikkhu.

The last path factor, *sammā-samādhi*, is defined as the bhikkhu who has gone into the first four trances. To practice this last path factor, one must **at least** develop the first trance (*paṭhama jhāna*). This can be developed by the bhikkhu, not by ordinary people. How can the ordinary person reach the first trance while engaging in so many things?

## 2. Three Categories of the Noble Eightfold Path

The noble eightfold path can be divided into three categories. In the one of the discourses of the Majjhimā Nikāya, it is said that the path factors should be placed in the threefold restrain (*Ti-sikkhā*) which is *sīla*, *samādhi*, and *paññā*. Then the first two factors (*sammā-diṭṭhi* and *sammā-saṅkappa*) are categorized in *paññā* in that particular sutta. It is not so. **The Buddha has never said that the noble eightfold path factors should be categorized on *sīla*, *samādhi*, and *paññā***. And the first two factors are always given at the beginning of the path. This particular sutta is a discourse of the dialogue between an *upāsaka* and a nun. The Buddha has not said so. If it is the case, the order of both factors should be changed into the end of the path; but this problem has not been solved even in this particular sutta.

Another point, the Buddha says that the path has **ten factors** when it is taken absolute aspects: two final stages are called *sammā-ñāṇa* (right knowledge) and *sammā-vimutti* (right freedom). So, the tenfold path is counted as **beginning with *sammā-diṭṭhi* and *sammā-saṅkappa*; ending with *sammā-***

*ñāṇa* and *sammā-vimutti*. There is no way of putting the *sammā-diṭṭhi* and *sammā-saṅkappa* at the end of the eight factors.

### 3. Conclusion

The point of the noble eightfold path is that our day to day behavior, so called 'ethics,' is directly connected to the path. **The first two factors** create a new person, a cultured person, an ethical person; the person who has a new attitude towards society. **The second three factors** are related to the basic ethical performance of the individual: he has to maintain the discipline in language; body discipline; and he should refrain from all those mischievous ways of behaviors. These are the basics of discipline in Buddhism. That is ethics in relation to word and body. And ethics in relation to mind, which is a psychological ethics, is described in **the last three factors** how we develop the psychology towards the others. So, the noble eightfold path is **an ethical path**; it has nothing to do with any metaphysical or philosophical element.

### 4. Additional Comments

(1) There is no difference between *lay-ariya-sāvaka* and *bhikkhu-ariya-sāvaka*; but the **householder cannot practice** *sammā-samādhi*. They can become *sotāpanna* in different ways. If a person wants to practice the path seriously, he must renounce the householder life. There is no way for the ordinary householder to practice meditation.

(2) The misinterpretation of *sammā-ājīva* is prevailed among the Theravadin countries like Sri Lanka, Thai, and Burma; it is **a traditional interpretation** which is not based on the canonical texts.

(3) **Sīla** is **fourfold** as far as the Buddhist **monks** are concerned:

(a) *pātimokkhasaṃvara sīla*: virtue of restraining according to *pātimokkha* (220 for bhikkhus; 304 for bhikkhunis). These vinaya rules discipline the speech and bodily acts. This is not enough for completing discipline. Mind is not disciplined under the vinaya rules. Therefore, the Buddha has introduced three more *sīlas*.

(b) *indriyasaṃvara sīla*: virtue of restraining the **sense faculties**. The objects that you taken through your sense organs should be completely eradicated from the mind screen. If not, you will never get free from the past images, alcohol, etc.

(c) *paccayasannissita sīla*: virtue associated with **four basic conditions**; food, clothing, lodging, and medicines. You may practice 220 vinaya rules but still you can expect more comfortable and better conditions. You still have greed that can never be stopped. So, this *sīla* helps the bhikkhu to be satisfied with what is given.

(d) *ājīvapārisuddhī sīla*: virtue regarding the purity of wrong behaviors. In the first chapter of *Visuddhimagga*, Ven. Buddhaghosa says that the *ājīvapārisuddhīsīla* is the *sammā-ājīva*. Now it becomes very clear that the *sammā-ājīva* is not meant for the lay people.